

Is American culture a sustainability problem?

The definition of a culture encompasses customs, beliefs, values, behaviors, and many other aspects of a social group. Inherently, it is difficult to concisely define a culture, especially when it comes to the American culture, one that is widely known as the cultural “melting pot”. Regardless of where the boundaries of American culture lie, there are undeniable sustainability problems about the way the American society works and the way Americans live and strive towards their dreams. As a small portion of the society immensely enjoy the rewards of tremendous economic growth from an established consumerist society, the end of affordable energy and other precious resources like clean air is alarmingly imminent. Considering the urgency of the sustainability issue and the need to eradicate the root cause, it seems crucial to evaluate whether American culture is a sustainability problem that obstructs the great future Americans dream of.

Naomi Klein, a Canadian author and anti-globalization, anti-war activist, claims that American culture is indeed a sustainability problem by saying that Americans are addicted to taking risks. Arguably, majority of our ancestors took the great risk to travel to this continent of supposedly inexhaustible frontier from the opposite side of the Atlantic ocean and built the wonderful and powerful nation in which we live in. However, Americans are far too accustomed to gambling with precious things. When we should act about an environmental crisis, we tend to procrastinate by asking ourselves what if the scientists were wrong? For instance, what if the world will be fine if the average temperature rises more than 2 degrees Celsius? What we must learn is that the price we pay betting on the scientists being wrong is typically much harder to swallow than betting on them being right. In addition, there are ample examples of undesirable consequences caused by the absence of precautionary practices. If we were to take risks, we should be constantly thinking about potential failures and consequently implementing precautionary principle to prevent irreversible catastrophes. As to seeking the true consequences of launching a new product, the industry is currently not bearing the burden of proof. Rather, corporations chase after the associated profits in the quickest way possible. Thus, they cannot afford to lose the time needed by thorough testings.

Later on in Klein’s TED Talk, she also sheds light on two unsustainable mentalities Americans have that can possibly trace back to the beliefs America was built upon. Firstly, many of us assume limitless abundance of precious, natural resources. While most people understand that crude oil and natural gas will no longer be available to us in the foreseeable future, there still is not enough overall effort put into steering the country away from heavy reliance on these fossil fuels because we hope that we will find another kind of nonrenewable to exploit in time to avoid apocalyptic energy crises.

Once that replacement runs out, there will always be another kind of natural resource to sustain us. Worse still, capitalism will not survive without resources to exploit. Another type of assumed abundance is the nature's miraculous capability to deal with our problems that only exist in our wishful thinking. Klein points out that Tony Hayward, the former CEO of British Petroleum, thinks the amount of oil spilled into Gulf of Mexico only accounts for a negligible fraction of the ocean's total volume. Therefore, Gulf of Mexico's ability to survive the oil spill incident was taken as granted. The important point Hayward and quite a few other Americans missed is the effects of chain reactions that often occur in nature. The damage to the population of phytoplankton can severely affect the health of marine lives that feed on phytoplankton. As the damage climbs the food chain, decimation of animals of much larger sizes than phytoplankton is only a matter of time. In the past few decades, there are certainly no shortage of similar examples where consequences initially thought to be inconsiderable came back on our shoulders. Secondly, Americans need to stop thinking technologies can conquer nature, a task far from our destiny. When the technologies we created in the past threw the nature off its balance, it is very foolish to think that some new technologies will come along to save us. Heroic endings in Hollywood movies do not exactly happen in reality.

Although Klein brought up a few strong points to support her claim that American culture is unsustainable, there are still some subpar aspects of her TED Talk, including a rather off-putting assumption. Given the title *Addicted to Risk* is dedicated to risking taking, there should be stories from two sides to making risky decisions. While she devoted more than enough time to demonstrate the negative consequences of taking great risks, she fails to credit the merit proper risk management deserves. As she confirms, America was built on risky exploration of the American frontier. Additionally, she has few advice to offer when it comes to pointing the audience to the right direction. The majority of the audience undoubtedly left the presentation knowing why it is bad to risk with our future, but I suspect few knew what they could do to change it. Regarding the only piece of suggestion she gave, she did not clarify what it meant to risk with confronting recklessness. Did she encourage the audience to be rebellious? However, what she did point fingers at was that men are more likely to take great risks. Considering this speech was delivered to an all-female audience, it was probably acceptable and boosted the appeal of her argument. Besides that occasion, such a generalization is likely to provoke some strong reactions from other audience.

On the other side of the debate, President Ronald Reagan reassures Americans the global leadership of the nation and the flexibility of its culture during his candidacy announcement. He starts by stating that Americans are not afraid of the future and embrace what may come because they know America will be a great place in the future. An article titled *The United States of Entrepreneurs* from *The Economist* directly backs up Reagan's claim. Further, history has proven again and again that American culture is diverse and open to change at anytime. In conjunction with the embracing character of the culture, America's leadership in the world has been unchallenged. If we do not accept the responsibilities of leadership, who else in the world will be? Therefore, regardless of the battles we are fighting or the crises we are confronting, we can rest assured that America will always be at the forefront.

Unfortunately, the generational gap between the speech and present undermines Reagan's argument in a few areas, not to mention that he brought some counterpoints to his argument himself. Soon after he claims that Americans anticipate a great future, he also points out that few people possess the will to take action because the problems are getting increasingly complex. To no one's surprise, one of the sources of complication concerns access to untapped energy. Arguably, it may have been easier for America to rise as the global leader it is today when it did, for America and the rest of the world heavily relied on cheap energy which America had access to. Today, America spends top dollars daily all over the world to secure its access to relatively cheap energy for the future. Without much of the cheap energy as stepping stone and other sources of wealth, there is a greater doubt that America's global leadership remains unchallenged.

Secondly, by the nature of presidential campaign speech, some of Reagan's words are only politically correct. In his speech, he advocates restoration of the economy's health. Maybe it was actually needed in that era. Presently, health of the economy is certainly not so much a cause to the sustainability problem, but dare he say the economy needed to be steered away from capitalizing natural resources. As previously mentioned, capitalism depends on the endless feed of resources. Only the end of the feed would necessitate an economic reform. Another political statement was that the government was to be blamed for the energy crisis. Reagan believes that it would be ridiculous to tell people to let go of their American Dreams and start conserving energy. Well, I think we can all agree that using less is definitely not enough to steer clear of the energy crisis. While government has the responsibility to lead the energy reform, it is very much the responsibilities of the consumers to participate as well.

My stance on the sustainability aspect of American culture lies in between yes and no. In short, America certainly has what it takes to be a sustainable country, but it is far from the ideal as it stands right now. The article *Prerogatives of Power* reaffirms America's capability to be a global leader. However, it must stop abusing this power to distort facts and threats, revise history, and "defend world peace", since study has shown that the further a Latin America country stays away from America's intrusion, the freer and more prosperous it is. Instead, this power should be used to turn the country into the leading innovator in sustainability. Considering America's habit of being the global leader in almost everything, there is no reason not to believe America will be at the top of the leaderboard if the game is sustainability.

Two additional aspects of how America works keep me hopefully about the American culture taking a turn towards greater sustainability. Firstly, given the democratic foundation of the society, the government has every right to return to serving the masses, not the few business world titans who sponsor politicians' campaigns. With the government backing them up, the masses are truly the ones who cause the culture to shift. A culture is all about its people, not the corporations. Therefore, corporations

must be deterred to hinder cultural change. Let American culture be as embracing as the people.

The short films *Merchants of Cool* and *Toxic Sludge is Good For You* reveal another powerful way to initiate a cultural change. For numerous reasons, the teens are one of the most important demographic groups. Many cultural changes stem from nuances of the teen culture. The two films together clearly demonstrate media's power to influence the opinion of targeted audience. In order to survive in our current economic system, many big corporations hire specialists to discover or fabricate the next cool thing for revenue generation. With this tremendous control in mind, sustainability can be called the next big thing under favorable circumstances. If that becomes the case, people are looking for sustainable products, and corporations close the loop by making the right products to supply the demand. As a result, American culture will become sustainable.

Citations:

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